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Left to My Self-Sufficiency I would have Died¹

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Text: 1 Kings 17:8–16

Left to my self-sufficiency,
I would have died—
long before I ever grasped the difference
between safe dark womb and
bright challenging world,

long before I knew smiles and hugs,
the taste of salt or sweet,
the smell of newly plowed earth,
the feel of the wind.

Left to my self-sufficiency,
I would have died.
But God was there for me.
I called her mother.

She sheltered me from sun and rain,
fed me, clothed me,
taught me the difference between good
and evil,
kept me safe from preying beasts and
prying eyes.

Useless, worthless bundle of burden
though I was,
God was there for me
surrounding me with love.

Useless, worthless burden though I was,

God was there for me,
wearing the face, the arms, the heart
of my mother.

Does it puzzle you that this story
does not tell my name?

My name is every-child,
one mother away from death,
one face, arms, heart of God
away from death.

Left to my self-sufficiency,
I would have died,
I, and my child with me.

Oh, it had been a good marriage.
My spouse was well-employed,
and generous.

We were ecstatic when our child was born.
All our dreams were coming true.
Until the morning my husband wouldn't wake up.

There was no reason for the death of a young,
healthy man.

So of course they blamed the woman,
and turned their backs on me and my child.

Left to my self-sufficiency
I would have died.
But God was there for me.
I called him Prophet.

I almost *did* die when I heard what he wanted
from me.

I don't know how he did it.
Perhaps he charmed it out of the villagers.
Perhaps it was magic, or miracle.

But every day when I awoke certain that there
would be nothing to sustain us,
I was wrong.

Unable to care for myself or my child,
 God was there for me,
 surrounding me with love.

Unable to meet my responsibilities,
 God was there for me,
 wearing the face, promises, heart of the
 Prophet.

Does it puzzle you that this story
 does not tell *my* name?

My name is every-woman,
 one prophet away from death,
 one face, promise, heart of God
 away from death.

Left to my self-sufficiency,
 I would have died,
 at the hands of the tyrant or
 the merciless desert.

Being a prophet is all well and good
 when the news is good,
 but when the news is bad,
 everyone wants to shoot the messenger.

I must have been a sight straggling out of the
 desert that day.

Oh, the story-teller makes it pretty enough,
 but I can tell you the closest I'd been to water
 in days was the mirage that plagued my vision.

My throat was so burned I could barely croak
 the word "Water!"

Wild-eyed, disheveled, sunburnt wreck,
 God was there for me,
 holding me up and dripping cool water down
 my parched throat.

Rendered incapacitated by heat and thirst,
 God was there for me,

wearing the face, hands, heart of a terrified
widow one meal away from death.

Does it puzzle you that the story names me?
I used to think it was because I
was God's prophet.

Now I know it was a mistake.
Yes, I embodied God for that widow,
and for her child, too.

But she embodied God for me.
She gave me,
on the strength of a whispered promise,
all she had left of life.

She put herself and her child at absolute risk
for a crazy man from the desert.
She had nothing to lose, you say?

And I? Had I anything more?
Left to my self-sufficiency,
I would have died,

one woman away from death,
one face, hands, heart of God
away from death.

We embodied God for each other,
widow and prophet,
woman and man,
yes, even infant and adult.

I learned a lot about God,
watching that mother and child together,
more than all that we were taught in prophet's
school.

Left to our self-sufficiency,
we would be dead.

Meaningless, misguided ciphers,
we would be drowned in the abyss of
purposelessness, hate, violence, ruin

that we perpetuate among ourselves.

But God was there for us,
birthing us into a life of loving relationship,
washing us free of the grit and corruption of
the desert of sin.

Left to our self-sufficiency we would be dead.

But God was there for us,
flooding our empty hearts with
the spirit of gratitude and joy,
inviting us to a feast which banishes all hunger
and fills us with passion and strength
to embody God for each other.

Left to our self-sufficiency we would be dead,
one pastor, one congregation
one body of Christ, one face, promise, heart of
God away from death.

At the font,
with its waters of baptism,
at the table of Christ where bread and wine are shared
we are promised God is and will be here for us.

For me, Pamela,
For Katharine Louise,
For each of us, by name.

Unlike the child and the widow in the story,
when the church embodies God for us
we are named so that we know without
question that God's love is for us.

At the font,
with its waters of baptism;
at the table of Christ
with its bread and wine to be shared,
when the church embodies God for us
we are gifted with love and
the power to embody Christ for one another.

It does not matter if we are widow or prophet,
grown-up or child.

Whatever we are,
we stand for everyone in God's global village,
we stand for everyone daily in need of
someone to embody God for us,
daily enabled to embody God for others.

It does not matter what our name is,
we stand for every child,
one mother away from death,
for every woman, one prophet away from death,
for every prophet, one widow away from death.

It does not matter what our name is,
we stand for every pastor,
one congregation away from death,
for every congregation,
one pastor away from death,
for all creatures, all the earth,
one face, arms, heart of God
away from death.

The child, the widow, the prophet
had less than nothing to offer.
Left to their self-sufficiency,
each would have died.

But God was there for them,
God embodied in another's need and
in another's love,
God enough to bring life out of death.

Left to our self-sufficiency,
we would be dead.

But God is here for us,
embodied in Katharine's need and
in our love,
God enough to bring life out of death.

Left to its self-sufficiency,
the world is dead.

But God is here for it,
embodied in its need and in our love,
God enough to bring life out of the horror of

warfare and the ravages of pollution.

The community was neither large nor wealthy.
Sometimes they weren't sure how they would
pay for heat and light.

Still, they made up their minds no one in the
community would go hungry,
no one would be left to fade away into loneliness,
no one would be forgotten about
when they moved away.

Every time there was a baptism
they gathered together afterward to take stock.

"How are we doing?" they would ask.

"How are we doing at living in the joy and
confidence of God's love for us?"

"How are we doing at being Christ for one another?"

"Is our telephone network working?
Are we missing anyone in our visits?
Does anyone need anything?"

"Do we know where all our baptized babies are,
and how they are,
and what they might need from us?"

"How are we doing," they would ask,
"at embodying God in the world?"

After one baptism
they set about sponsoring a refugee family.

After another,
they sent some members of the congregation to
a conflict management training program so they
could help their community through issues that
threatened to divide them.

After yet another,
they found an ingenious way to get around the
bureaucracies and the bullies
and get care packages of food and medicine to

desperate Iraqi children,
children who left to their self-sufficiency would
be dead.

I am not quite sure how they did it.

But like the meal in the widow's cupboard,
and the oil in the jar,
the water in the font never ran out.

Neither did the love.

Left to their self-sufficiency,
they would have been dead,
they and the world with them.

But God was there for them,
wearing the faces reflected in
the waters of baptism
and the waters of the world,
and the world lived.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

Notes

- ¹ For the baptism of Katharine Louise Henry-Rodgers, November 10, 1991, Melville, Saskatchewan.